

ALTERNATIVE GENDER ROLES FOR MALES:
RESEARCH ON THE POLYNESIAN MAHU TRADITION
AND THE CONCEPT OF GENDER TRANSPOSITION

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One of the greatest weaknesses of the newly-emerging field of Men's Studies, and of gender studies generally, is its almost exclusive focus on this society. When gender roles or sexuality are discussed, they are almost always conceived as white American mainstream cultural roles. It is only rarely that gender roles among other ethnic groups are covered. Even when they are, the attention is usually focused on Black Americans, who share many of the same cultural constructs as White Americans. What such approaches ignore is the total lack of attention paid to alternative ways that women's and men's roles can be socially constructed.

By ignoring the different possibilities that can be seen from a multi-cultural perspective, an exclusive focus on only one society (our own) puts blinders on the imagination. Traditional gender roles are perceived as static or "natural" because no alternatives are known. Anything different is seen as "unnatural." On the other hand, a multi-cultural perspective suggests that our culture's ideas of gender and sexuality may be the more accurate target of an "unnatural" label, because of the culture's strict limitation of gender roles into only two acceptable forms and sexuality into only one form.

This ignorance of other cultures reflects a great weakness of American gender scholarship, because it dismisses the rest of humanity as inconsequential. Other peoples need to understand their gender roles, just as much as mainstream Americans do. But beyond that, it also prevents us from seeing the possibilities of gender role change in our own institutions. If we can understand the flexibility of gender roles, by looking at contrasting models among native peoples, we can use these ideas as a means of reorienting our institutions' response to gender variation in this society.

It is in this regard that anthropology can have a significant impact on gender studies, and on Men's Studies in particular. The pioneering work of Margaret Mead is usually known and cited in gender scholarship, to prove that what is seen as "men's work" and "women's work," and even "masculine personality" and "feminine personality," varies quite considerably from one society to another. [Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (

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(Yet, much of the more recent study in anthropology, on gender and sexual variance, has yet to be incorporated into gender studies.

Part of the problem has to do with the limitations of anthropology itself. While ethnographers have been studying men and women for generations, they often do not analyze their fieldwork through a gender perspective. What is needed is more trained anthropologists who are also familiar with feminist scholarship, so that they can incorporate the insights gained by psychologists and sociologists about modern American gender roles into a study of other societies. The best example of this process is in the field of history, where women's history is now making a great impact on the way we conceive of past roles for men. This expansion of feminist thought as applied to men's lives has still not been done, in a significant way, in the field of anthropology.

Among the most interesting work that has just started to emerge in anthropology is on the question of gender variance. Not all cultures agree with Western culture's view that all humans are either women or men. The commonly accepted notion that there is "the opposite sex," based on anatomical characteristics, is itself an artifact of our society's rigid sex roles. Among many cultures there existed different alternatives to "man" or "woman." And in others a person's biological attributes did not determine one's gender role. They wisely recognized that a person's gender role was more dependent on their personal inclinations and socialization, rather than just on their physical genitalia. Examples of this type of gender variance which have been published by anthropologists include the yirka-la ul in Siberia, the xanith in the Arabian peninsula, and the hijra in India.

[Waldemar Bogoras, *The Chuckchee Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 11, pt. 2 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1907), pp.449-57; Unni Wikan, "Man Becomes Woman: Transsexualism in Oman as a Key to Gender Roles," *Man* (n.s.) 12 (1977): 304-19; Serena Nanda, "The Hijras of India: A Preliminary Report," *Medical Law* 3 (1984): 59-75; and Serena Nanda, "The Hijaras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalized Third Gender Role," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11 (1984): . More essays on this type of alternative gender role will appear in Stephen O. Murray, ed., *Cultural Diversity and Homosexualities* (New York: Irvington, in press).]

What has often been diagnosed in a Western medical model as a kind of sickness called "gender dysphoria" has lately been termed "gender transposition" by less judgmental sexologists. John Money has invented new terms gynemimesis, (literally, "woman-miming") and andromimesis ("man-miming") as a subtype of gender transposition that distinguishes it from transsexualism. [John Money and Margaret Lamacz, "Gynemimesis and Gynemimetophilia: Individual and Cross-Cultural Manifestations of a Gender-Coping Strategy Hitherto Unnamed," *Comprehensive*

Psychiatry 25 (1984): 392-403.] This term recognizes an important distinction from transsexualism, which by itself implies that there are only two genders, and that a person who wants to follow another gender role has only one choice: to transfigure himself/herself to become "the opposite sex." It also clarifies a distinction from transvestism, because the majority of transvestites are heterosexual men who get sexual excitement from wearing women's clothing.

What we are left with in the use of gynemimesis is a term that describes a biological male who wishes to absorb some or all aspects of femaleness, either all the time or periodically through his life. If done to a partial extent, such a person might be referred to as androgynous, or in the vernacular as a fairy or faggot. If done to a full extent, they would be called a female impersonator, or in the vernacular a drag queen. [Peter Ackroyd, *Dressing Up: A History of Female Impersonation* (); Esther Newton, *Mother Camp* ().] These individuals are different from transvestites in that they are usually homosexual or asexual, and they are not transsexuals because they do not see themselves as women trapped in a male body and do not wish to change their biological sex.

The lack of a term in proper English denotes this phenomenon's lack of cultural acceptance in America. What would it be like to be in a society which did give an accepted cultural role for such individuals? We can understand this role only by looking cross-culturally, at societies which allow for more than two genders. The most notable example of this kind of society is with American Indians.

This alternative gender role among Native American cultures is referred to by anthropologists as berdache. Berdache status was taken on by an anatomical male who did not conform to standard men's roles, but who adopted much of the behavior, dress and social status of women. Among some groups, there was another status for females who became "warrior women," but this was seen as distinct from the gender-mixing status of the male berdache. [Evelyn Blackwood, "Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females," *Signs* 10 (1984): 27-41.]

The berdache was accepted by the community as a distinct gender, mixing and redefining the very concepts of what is considered male and female. Gender, the Native Americans understood, was more than just a question of biological sex. By taking on this distinct gender role, usually in childhood and socially recognized by puberty, it was expected that a berdache would have sexual relations with (or even marry) men. The man would not be considered as berdache, or even by the Western terminology "a homosexual." Most of the societies with an accepted role for berdache not only accepted the berdache's sexuality as natural for that person, but also gave high social status to berdaches. Their differences were considered to be evidence of intervention by the spirit world, so they often had an important role in religious and healing ceremonialism.

A number of early ethnographers wrote about berdaches with

whom they came in contact, while doing fieldwork on a particular tribe. [Among the most valuable of these field reports are Matilda Coxe Stevenson, "The Zuni Indians," Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Report 23 (1901-2): 38, 310, 380; W.W. Hill, "The Status of the Hermaphrodite and Transvestite in Navaho Culture," American Anthropologist 37 (1935): 273-79; and George Devereux, "Institutionalized Homosexuality of the Mohave Indians," Human Biology 9 (1937): 498-527; The best collection of primary documents about berdachism is in Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976).] Some more recent anthropologists have published essays about berdachism in general. [The best writings so far published on male berdachism include: Charles Callendar and Lee Kochems, "The North American Berdache" *Current Anthropology* 24 (October 1983): 443-70; Harriet Whitehead, "The Bow and the Burden Strap: A New Look at Institutionalized Homosexuality in Native North America," in *Sexual Meanings*, eds., Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 80-115; Donald Forgey, "The Institution of Berdache among the North American Plains Indians," *Journal of Sex Research* 11(1975):1-15; Sue Ellen Jacobs, "Berdache: A Brief Review of the Literature," *Colorado Anthropologist* 1(1968):25-40; Henry Angelino and Charles Shedd, "A Note on Berdache," *American Anthropologist* 57(1955):121-25.] But unfortunately, these recent essays have not been based on direct fieldwork observations with berdaches. For the last several years I have been conducting such fieldwork, based on interviews with berdaches and relatives of berdaches in several tribes of the northern Plains, the Southwest, and the Mayas of Yucatan Mexico. I am currently writing a book which combines study of the historical documentation, the ethnographic literature, and my own fieldwork with berdaches of different tribes.

Besides Native Americans, another important world culture area that institutionalized an alternative gender role for males is Polynesia. Concerned about the comparisons and contrasts between this gender role and the berdache, I recently did a brief period of fieldwork in Hawaii.

My research up to this stage has been proceeding under the assumption that gender non-conformity is a reflection of the basic personality orientation of an individual. This is the way that American Indian institutions treat it. Similarly, a massive 1981 survey sponsored by the Kinsey Institute, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* concluded that environmental factors in a child's upbringing did not offer a meaningful statistical correlation in explaining adult sexual preference. This study concluded that gender non-conformity in early childhood was the only real correlation with adult homosexual orientation.

This viewpoint suggests that a basic orientation is either inborn, or formed by the first two years of life. This view is precisely the attitude of most traditional American Indian

societies toward gender non-conformists. They accepted such persons as both different in personality and homosexual in sexual orientation, as part of their basic character. Many of the societies provided a recognized respected status for these individuals, considering them as sacred and having special spiritual gifts.

While working on this book, I have run across some other information from other Native American cultures that calls into question some of these ideas. I spent part of December on a brief field trip in Hawaii, interviewing traditional Hawaiian "Mahu" which is a gender non-conformist person very similar to Berdache. A mahu is a male who is very feminine, and traditional Hawaiian culture provided a status for these persons that incorporated--just like American Indians--both homosexual behavior and leadership roles in traditional Hawaiian religion.

This similarity is most interesting, but what struck me as extremely important for gender studies is a significant difference from American Indian societies. Among Indians, berdache gradually moved into the status by the child's own choice, implying that the society was simply accepting the person's inborn orientation. Among Hawaiians, I learned, the status of mahu was assigned.

According to my informants, a traditional Hawaiian family that has all boys and no girls, will even today take the youngest boy (after four or five years have passed and it becomes obvious that the mother is not going to have any more births) and raise him as a girl. A Hawaiian family without any girls is considered incomplete, because there is no daughter to continue the woman's labor performed by the mother and to be feminine company for the mother.

Interestingly, this role is not done for childcare responsibilities, since the boy chosen for the mahu role is the youngest child. It seems to be more associated with doing "women's work" and with providing psychological closeness to the mother, so that she will not be isolated in a family of all males. The mahu is the one who usually cares for the parents in their old age, and retains the greatest closeness to both parents as the other children move away to form their own families. So, mahu is integral to the way in which the family works as an institution.

The social utility of having a child as a mahu is clear. What is most interesting, however, is the seeming potential for ANY child to be assigned this role. What this implies is that gender identity and sexual orientation is much more flexible than we may have previously thought. My informants declare that mahus always grow up to be feminine and to be homosexually oriented.

To be sure, homosexual behavior is not always associated with gender non-conformity; there are plenty of masculine men who

will have sex with a mahu. But the feminine mahu is seen as automatically homosexual. Why is this, and what does it have to do with association with the traditional religion?

I am told by informants that similar customs exist in American Samoa, so this seems to indicate a widespread acceptance of this kind of gender reassignment by institutions throughout the Pacific.

Moreover, it seems that Polynesian Americans are not the only native peoples to have this custom. It also seems to exist among Alaska Natives. Last fall I talked with a sociologist who had been in the Aleutian Islands, and he assured me that a similar gender reassignment of boys is made with Aleut families. I had run across a few references to Aleut families taking "their most beautiful boy" and raising him as a girl, but had dismissed these references until now. So even though Aleuts, Hawaiians, and Samoans are culturally distinct, they are all groups of Americans whose social and family institutions share similar ideas of acceptance of gender reassignment.

This leads to more questions, as to the responses of modern governmental and social institutions to gender redefinition. I was told by my informants in Hawaii, for example, that the police treat mahus quite respectfully. In the public schools, mahu students are allowed to use the girls' restrooms. And the U.S. military leaders at the Pearl Harbor Naval Base undoubtedly realize that more than a few of their male personnel are sexually involved with mahus. How have these diverse institutions adapted to these customs? The reactions of other social service agencies, like family counseling and therapy centers, also need to be investigated.

Though it is more rare, I have discovered a few references to Native American families without any sons taking a daughter and raising her as a male. I am not as confident of the ability of a male researcher to gain the most valuable information on female gender reassignment, since many of these societies have traditionally been ones in which male and female social spheres are quite separate (especially concerning intimate details like this topic). But I feel that I could do a better job on this aspect of the topic than any other male, since no female anthropologist has yet (despite my urgings to women friends) committed to do fieldwork on this topic.

I believe that I am more familiar with the literature that has been written on gender non-conformity in Native American cultures than almost any other scholar. But very little of the most crucial data is written down, so it requires the fieldwork skills of an anthropologist to travel to these areas and interview people. I can state with confidence that I have now interviewed more American Indian berdaches than any other living scholar, so I think I am the best person to do fieldwork on this topic in other native American cultures.

I feel that this topic has enormous implications for our understanding of gender socialization and the fluidity with which individuals can adapt to masculine or feminine roles. Such fluidity suggests that masculinity and femininity are social constructs that are even less inherent to individual personalities than we have previously thought.

Feminist scholarship is mounting an intellectual challenge to these older ideas, building on socialization and interactionist theory. By suggesting that (if so socialized) virtually any male child can be raised female, this research project takes that argument one step further. By showing that when institutions like the family and the wider community accept gender reassignment, biological sex is distinct from gender role. This study could, I believe, make a unique and significant contribution to gender theory scholarship.

This type of study would present a new way to look at gender role changes in this society. It would provide families, governmental policymakers, and social scientists with models of institutions which adapt successfully to deal with the fact of gender non-conformity.